

May 2009

On the Job

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Recommended Citation

Knight, Addie (2009) "On the Job," *Ethos*: Vol. 2009 , Article 13.
Available at: <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos/vol2009/iss4/13>

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BUTTERFLY MAINTEN- ANCE

By Addie Knight

Photo by Alexis Eischeid



Going to work is like stepping into a tropical paradise for Nathan Brockman. As the curator of the butterfly wing at Reiman Gardens, Brockman is responsible for maintaining the jungle-like addition to the gardens' main building. The Iowa State graduate decided early in his life that a career with insects was the best fit for him. And although Brockman admires all insects, he says he believes that there's something special about butterflies.

"I've been [interested in] insects since I was a child, collecting them and trying to keep them," Brockman says. "I like butterflies because they are an excellent ambassador to the insect world. Everyone loves butterflies."

As the butterfly area curator, Brockman's main duties vary. He ensures that the wing runs properly and that Reimean Garden receives all their shipments of butterflies. There are five different butterfly suppliers who ship their winged beauties from all over the world, including Costa Rica, South America, Ecuador and Florida. When the wing reopened on April 1, there were up to 800 butterflies from 80 different species on exhibit.

When the wing is open, docent volunteers are required to work with the visitors. After completing training, the volunteers walk guests through the exhibit and present them with interesting facts regarding the butterfly species. They are also responsible for watching to make sure that nothing dangerous happens to the butterflies.

"Since butterflies are considered pests, we have to make sure that none get out," Brockman says.

Along with exotic butterflies, the exhibit also houses a variety of tropical plants. Every day, Brockman prunes the plants and provides the butterflies with food, usually consisting of nectar and fermenting fruit. Because the plants are not indigenous to Ames, the pruned remnants are taken to Vet Med to be burned.

Even though the exhibit is an important part of Brockman's job, a lot of his work happens in the laboratory. Each day, dead butterflies are cleaned out of the wing and taken inside to be sorted. They are placed in a refrigerator and later used for educational seminars and displays.

After each new shipment arrives, the butterflies—then cocoon-ed caterpillars—are sorted and placed on cotton twine. Then, they are placed in chamber incubators until they are ready to be released. Once the butterflies have shed their cases, they are placed in cages to be released, one of Brockman's favorite parts of the process.

Brockman also has tips for those planning to visit the exhibit.

"The best time to come is in the morning on a bright sunny day," he says. "It's like a butterfly explosion in the wing."